'Fires' overreaches in blaming computers for N.Y.'s '70s decline

"THE FIRES: How a Computer Formula, Big Ideas, and the Best of Intentions Burned Down New York City -- and Determined the Future of Cities" By Joe Flood, Riverhead Books $26.95

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By Glenn C. Altschuler

The 1970s was a disastrous decade for New York City. Economic output fell by 20 percent. Average income declined by 35 percent. And fire, freelance writer Joe Flood points out, was "a central tribulation" for the Big Apple. It killed thousands, injured tens of thousands, destroyed hundreds of thousands of homes, chased whites to the suburbs and wreaked havoc with neighborhood communities.

In "The Fires," Mr. Flood blames the epidemic on the central planning of technocrats. Influenced by "ignorance-inducing wishful thinking," he argues, Mayor John Lindsay and Fire Commissioner John O'Hagan wanted to believe they could cut budgets while fighting fires more effectively. So, they used the computer models developed by the RAND Corp. to justify closing fire stations in the city's poorest neighborhoods, the most likely sites of arson and conventional, accidental fires in abandoned buildings.

"The Fires" is an exercise in hyperbole. Although he acknowledges, grudgingly, that statistical tools can be useful, Flood believes that when central planners are in charge, they "often leave the Dr. Strangeloves to run amok." And he's often way ahead of his evidence in attributing the fires in the South Bronx, the Lower East Side, Harlem, and Brooklyn, to RAND think-tankers.

Statistical models, of course, are only as good as the data on which they rely, the experts who interpret them, and the policy makers who use them. RAND's recommendations were no exception. Installing call box alarms throughout the city, as Flood points out, did result in a seven-fold increase in false alarms. Comparing regions only to regions in the same "hazard category" -- valuable commercial, high-hazard residential -- rather than to regions throughout the city, did lead ghetto neighborhoods to lose companies. But surely measuring proximity to fire-prone neighborhoods and the time it takes for a unit to respond to a fire can help public officials decide where to put fire stations.

Equally important, Mr. Flood lists vulnerability to political influence as a "major weakness of modeling systems." Lindsay and O'Hagan, he indicates, didn't want to spend money on poor, politically weak neighborhoods. So they leaped on and hid behind RAND's recommendations. Fair enough. But, as Mr. Flood acknowledges, albeit grudgingly, the "branch approach" to decision-making -- an incremental, decentralized, bottom-up process -- comes "with a great deal of leeway for corruption." And, of course, for political influence. No matter what Mr. Flood might think, politicians who provide government jobs, Christmas turkeys, tenement apartments and burial money in exchange for the votes of their constituents aren't necessarily more likely to settle on sound public policies and implement them effectively.

Mr. Flood gives us only two choices for governing a city. Both of them rely on politically charged fairy tales. There was a "genius" to the structure of political machines, he writes, because ward healers rejected abstract ideas, contended with the problems of the slums as they were, and, like Mr. Flood's hero, Ronald Reagan, believed that bureaucrats were "gumming up the machinery." By contrast, Mr. Flood emphasizes, central planning systems analysts believed in the fiction that perfect information could be found and applied to complex decisions -- and "churned out clunkers like the Vietnam War."

Computer formulas, big ideas, and "quants" didn't burn down New York City. People did. And bad decisions by politicians forced to cut budgets with the city on the verge of bankruptcy didn't do enough to deter them.

Mr. Flood claims that the recent successes in fighting fires and criminals with techniques developed by systems analysts are due to "pure power politics rather than the illuminating power of numbers."

But that's because, more than those he criticizes, he is a slave to ideology.